

They lie in a pile of disarray, of scuffed toes and worn fabric, of shiny leather and stained laces fraying at the edges, of dirty rubber worn thin. Resting in the shadows of the hallway, they hold the quiet air of things left behind in the constant rush of everyday life, forgotten on the floor without a second thought.

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The grandfather's slippers are caked with mud. Bits of soil fall to the tiled floor as they dry in the warmth of the house, ground into dust as others step by. The shoes themselves remain damp, after they've been soaked in the chilly muck of early spring, that time of year when the snow is just melting, and patches of ice lurk here and there.

The midnight before, he saw a tulip.

A single tulip in the snow, crimson as blood against the stark white, fully in bloom. It was the red of his mother's rough apron, bobbing through her vegetable garden, back in the days of romping through dried grass clippings and streams, when he was still so young. It was the red of peppermint candy from glass jars, the red of the veins in his father's bloodshot eyes. The red of the setting sun.

He *thought* he saw it...no, he was *sure* of it. As he clumsily slid out from under his blanket, as he placed his feet in his slippers and fumbled with the lock on the patio door, he watched the scarlet petals. He was scared they would disappear; afraid his mind had finally begun to pluck the strings in his head, tangling memories with thoughts, thoughts with dreams, dreams with memories. He struggled urgently through the wet snow and yielding earth beneath it, body trembling. But not from the cold.

Slipper met ice. As he stumbled, the flower was jarred from his sight, blurring away, out the corner of his vision. With a cry, he righted himself. Blinking in the bite of the wind, his eyes searched frantically, jerking quickly in their sockets.

But it was gone.

He stood in the snow and the mud, staring aimlessly as the hems of his thin pajamas soaked in the dampness of the season. Already his slippers were ruined, spots of dirt darkening the fabric, radiating out into the threads.

The grandmother came out moments later, rushed down to the cramped backyard where he stood, still and unmoving like something dead. Tightly, she gripped his hand. It was cold and rough against her own shaking fingers, and she tugged slightly, forcing him to look at her.

“What are you thinking?! It’s freezing out here!”

He gazed through her blankly, without recognition.

“Who are you?” He asked flatly, confused. He was so tired.

The grandmother said nothing for a moment. She stared into the distance, to the horizon where the moon shone bright and ripe in the soup of starlight.

“You...know me...don’t you?” Tears grew quickly in her eyes and fell in crystalline drops, the first time in many, many years. She held the grandfather’s hand even tighter, clenching it hard, as if it would tether him to her. But he was already gone, somewhere far away.

The grandfather cried a little bit too, but he didn’t know why. Watching the strange woman beside him sob just made his eyes well up, in fat beads that followed the paths of wrinkles to his chin. They stood together in the snow, in their matching house slippers, the ones they bought together on their 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, until they could bear it no longer; until the corduroy seams of their shoes were permeated with the mud, the cold, and the tears of something that had finally come to take both of them away.

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Although the mud has been briskly scrubbed away, a new stain is spattered across the fabric of the grandmother’s house slippers. They are placed neatly, side-by-side, pushed against the wall. It’s the way she’s always left them, her shoes. And everything else for that matter—tidy, tidy, tidy, nothing out of place. At least, that’s how it used to be. The house she lives in now is rampant with sloppy grandchildren pitching their things everywhere, messy like wild creatures. Perhaps at some point past, she would’ve picked up after them, or at least she would have made some small attempt. But in these days of leftover time, it seems the very most she can do is line up her shoes, toes to the wall, heels together, before she retreats away into the peace of her room, to sleep.

While she naps, she reaches for the grandfather, entangles her fragile fingers with his gnarled hands. The blanket rumples up around her ankles, exposing speckled, translucent skin, marbled with blue veins running up and down the muscle.

Her feet are bare and thin, wrinkled and frail like little baby birds.

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The mother's shoes lay haphazardly among her children's, and every time she sees the pile she makes a little sigh—the kind she has been making for as long as she can remember, stretching through her late nights and rough days. It's the kind of breath that flips the little wisps of hair away from her forehead; the kind that makes her eyes look sad.

Hers are the dark ones, the leather flats that are all scuffed up around the toes. There is a little nick here and there, and a slight tear from the time she threw it at the wall.

It has been hard work with the grandmother and grandfather moving in, especially with the way the grandfather has been lately, but the mother doesn't want to just leave them at some retirement home, where they'll slowly shrink away.

“Momma, what will you do when you get old?” She asked once, when she was a child. Her mother braided her hair, combing fingers through the fine brown strands and plaiting them into long ropes down the child's back. “Are you gonna go to some fancy retirement island, and drink out of a coconut with one of those fancy umbrellas?”

“Hah!” The grandmother chuckled. “When Daddy and I get old, you and I can switch, and you'll take care of us, ok?” She smiled widely and tapped the little girl's nose.

Sometimes, the mother wishes she could love someone, the way the grandmother loves the grandfather. Jealousy is the word for what she feels, every time she sees couples cuddling together in the cold of the streets, when a girl's head fits perfectly in the hollow of her sweetheart's neck. Sweet, pure affection brings her back to a time when she thought the meaning of the word 'love' was clear. Before the marriage, the fights, the divorce.

His shoes are still in the closet, way in the back corner, stuffed behind a bag of threadbare socks and a pile of scarves; the nice leather ones she was going to give him for his birthday. It was going to be a surprise. He would smile the smile she used to know, and then maybe she could bring herself to love him again.

But it fell apart too soon. Her shrill scream and his loud yells echoed in the kitchen as they argued past the children's bedtime, through the night. Sometimes the lights stayed off, and she could hear his angry voice coming from somewhere in the darkness, behind the chinking shatter of glass and the clatter of furious movement. Like his body wasn't there; it was just her and the black of two o'clock in the morning, his words ringing and falling out of nowhere, all around like piercing hail.

The children were only in elementary school and kindergarten then, so she forgot him, and poured herself into the world of her son and daughter. She tried her best as a mother then, telling them "Good night, I love you... Mommy always loves you." Sometimes she bit her lip before the word "love" and tried not to choke. Sometimes she just held them close and felt the warmth of their little bodies against her chest.

Although it's been ages since the last time she could shop, just by herself in the mall, the mother has a beautiful pair of shoes that she hides away, in the same box as the patent leather men's shoes. Her feet haven't grown since high school, so on some nights she pulls them out and just looks at them for a while. Then she puts them on and twirls by herself.

She sings herself a simple melody and pretends like somebody's arms are around hers, leading her into a dip, just closing her eyes and letting her body fall.

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The son's ratty sneakers are flung apart, laces in perpetual knots. They're the kind with mesh in the sides, which were white on the shelf at the store. But by now the mesh has holes in it, and the whole affair has faded into a resigned sort of grey.

Despite their decrepit state, he denies any offers from his mother to buy new ones. He sees the way she looks sometimes, so tired from work, her two children, and their grandparents that she seems to be sagging under the weight of it.

He never knew his dad well, but sometimes it's what he wishes for. Someone who can just help with this perpetual swirl of exhaustion and tired good-night kisses that still come when the mother thinks he's asleep, even though the son is already in middle school.

"But honey, look at them! Oh, Christ, is that blood right there?"

The son just laughs a little and tells her that he likes the shoes he has now. He doesn't mention that little pieces of gravel find their way in through the holes in the rubber soles, or that

there is a perpetual blister on his big toe from the part that busted a few weeks ago. Instead he grins, flashing his goofy looking smile, and the mother laughs.

He doesn't mention that it *is* blood right there. It doesn't take much to remember that day, riding down the steep dirt hill on his bicycle, trying to balance both his backpack and his poster project, all the while fishtailing on gravel and trying his best to avoid the potholes. His mother had to leave early for work and unfortunately, he had missed the bus. His sister was already dropped off at elementary school, and he was alone. But that was ok; he could take care of himself. Riding his bike wasn't a big deal. The poster complicated things slightly, but everything was fine. Everything was—

Before he even registered what was happening, the son was flying. For a minute, he was suspended in the air, weightless. He was a goldfish in the water, he was a cloud hung up in the blue of summer sky. He was floating away somewhere in a tiny little soap bubble, surrounded by the shining rainbow colors that moved in iridescent waves.

But the moment was over too soon, and the son screamed as he was pitched violently against the earth, over the pothole he hadn't seen. First his arms crumpled with the impact, face and ribs following closely behind. He didn't feel the pain right away, tumbling into the ditch on the side of the road. Only the thumping of his own small heart, that seemed to fill his head with its heavy *bump-bumps*. For a few minutes, that was the only sound he heard, lying in the moldy leaves that had collected in the ditch.

The pain soon arrived though, just like it always does. Along with it came the warmth of dripping blood, and the pressure of tears behind his eyes.

“Don't cry,” he spoke out loud to himself, through trembling lips and gritted teeth, as blood trickled from his nostril, falling on his shirt, over his hands, his shoes. “Don't cry,” he repeated. “Gotta...get to school.” Wincing, he gingerly wiped the blood away with his hands, discovering scrapes across his arms and legs. Beside the ditch, he stooped to retrieve his things, and carefully mounted the bike again.

With every pedaling motion he could feel the blood throbbing in his legs, could still hear the beating of his heart.

He was younger then, and his sneakers were still new.

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The daughter is in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade now. She's almost a big girl.

That's what the teacher's heeled shoes told her, as she peered out from under her school desk. She heard the teacher say, Stop hiding under there, it's immature and inappropriate behavior. The daughter didn't budge. Instead she picked at the velcro on her little pink shoes.

Those shoes are lying between her brother's grubby sneaker and her mother's black flats. The daughter doesn't like to put them on very often. When she puts on her shoes, it means she's going outside. Which means she's going to school.

It started when she was in kindergarten, when her mother and father were still together. They went to a nice restaurant for a dinner party, one with cloth napkins and tablecloths, dangling chandeliers and waiters with crisp bowties. The son was intrigued, staring at everything, and her parents were lovely, dressed up nicely, leaning into each other and smiling real smiles.

The daughter's dress was itchy and she scratched at the straps, irritated. When her mother pulled her hand slightly to make her stop, the daughter tried her best to ignore the prickly fabric. But by the time they got to the dinner table, she was in a terrible mood, growing more upset as the dress clung to her short frame, every movement scrubbing it against her skin.

As her parents introduced her to the others at the party, she pouted in her seat. The itch was crawling down her back, and she wanted to cry in frustration. Her face reddened and she clenched her hands into little fists, placed silently in her lap. Small crescent moons formed where her fingernails dug into the soft flesh. She regarded them with scrunched up eyes, as her father had something to drink, and laughed maybe a little too loud at someone else's joke.

Everyone seemed to be having a good time, even her quiet brother, who was laughing with another boy from someone or other's family. Nobody seemed to notice the little girl in a purple dress, with long pink scratch marks down her arms. So very quietly, very slowly, she lifted the embroidered tablecloth and slipped underneath, the fabric cool and soothing as it brushed past her skin.

The white linen closed behind her, whispering as it fell back into its smooth folds. Under the table it was dark and quiet, and she could barely hear the murmur of people, the clink of fork

and knife on plates. The whiteness of the tablecloth surrounded her, as if she was sinking into a pile of snow that muffled the intensity of life; it was as if an angel was wrapping its soft wings around her and shielding her from the world. Closing her eyes, she felt so calm and still it almost seemed as if time had stopped.

But that was not the case. The cloth lifted up, a triangle of yellow light reaching her in the dimness, edges sharp like blades. Her father's arm shot down and pulled her up roughly, and she cried out quietly, frightened.

"Don't you behave like this out here. You are an embarrassment right now, you hear?" He whispered loudly in her ear, face red and meaty. He did not let go of her arm, although she was twisting in his grip. The son met her gaze and looked away nervously, and her mother was speaking quickly to her father, trying to calm him. Everyone was staring at them then, and her mother was hissing to her father, Don't make a scene here right now, dear.

The daughter closed her eyes then, and focused on the darkness of her eyelids, the little lights that danced about like fairies after she kept them shut for long enough.

They left early.

As soon as the front door closed, she could hear her parents talking in clipped tones, raising their voices. The daughter ran to her room and tore her dress off, trembling. She wrapped herself in a thick blanket and went to her desk, lying under it like she did at the restaurant.

Muffled shouts came from the floor below, reverberating through the floor and vents. The daughter focused on the underside of the table, the little splinters and staples protruding from it. She gazed up through half-opened eyes for minutes, or maybe hours, until she fell asleep to the sound of something breaking downstairs.

And so whenever she found herself upset, the daughter simply crawled under a table or desk, and lay down beneath its shadow, staring upwards like she was watching for clouds, like maybe the next one would be cat-shaped, and she would laugh, and point upwards to where the birds fly, and she would look at you and say, Hey, look, a cat...what do you see?

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The daughter crouches beside the unruly pile of shoes. She pairs them all up, a left for a right, a right for a left. They are lined up, toes to the wall, heels together, the way she sees the

grandmother put hers. She hums a simple little melody, a song she heard her mother singing as she twirled around at night, alone in the hallway, her skirt flaring like a morning glory blooming. Carefully, she brushes away the dried mud from the grandfather's slippers, and places them by the grandmothers, pushing them close together. After some puzzling, she begins to untangle her brother's shoe laces, sitting cross-legged on the cold tile.

Shuffling footsteps echo in the hallway, and the grandmother appears in the hallway, hunched over and coughing slightly. She sees the daughter arranging the shoes, smiles wide like she used to, when she still had teeth. Thank you for doing that, dear, the grandmother says. The daughter smiles a little smile, the one she saves for the undersides of tables. She finishes untangling the laces of the once white sneakers, and sets them down neatly. I think we should tell Mommy that he needs some new shoes, she says quietly, indicating the holes and rips.

The grandmother nods, still smiling, and turns away.

After she is gone, the daughter takes her pink shoes and throws them outside, somewhere in the bushes. Laughing, she lingers for a moment, watching them disappear in the foliage.

The daughter goes to the kitchen table, lies under the dark wood, which is covered in rings from wet mugs, empty plates and a scattering of little crumbs. She lies there, watching the shadows slowly stretch as the sun meanders across the sky. Soon it begins to darken, and the daughter's favorite color sky is outside, pastel yellow melding into deep blue, soft like a blanket against her cheek.

I thought I told you to stop that, the mother says, pale feet appearing, bare on the linoleum. She crouches low and strokes her daughter's hair.

The daughter says nothing.

Sighing, the mother straightens and stands, turns like she's leaving. But she stops, bends down again, and then carefully crawls under the table, and lies down, pressing against her daughter, who wiggles closer. The daughter can feel her mother's heart beating as the mother murmurs, Love...you.

Then the mother opens her eyes, watching the sun set. She is quiet for a long time.

"Maybe we all need some new shoes," she finally says.